

Adolph Mortensen Remembers his escape from the U.S.S. Oklahoma.

USS Oklahoma (BB-37)

Adolph D. Mortensen - U.S. Navy Junior Officer,
25 Years old
Born April 10, 1916
USS Oklahoma (BB 44)
Battle Station: Boiler Room

On Dec. 7, 1941, I was the junior officer of the boiler division of the battleship OKLAHOMA. Following late night duty, I had gone to sleep shortly after 4:00 a.m., that Sunday morning. Less than three hours later, the sound of a voice on the ship's loudspeaker, unmistakably different from the usual announcements, brought me quickly awake. "Air raid! Air raid! This is a real attack, real planes, real bombs!", followed by an obscenity, crackled from the loudspeaker. Wearing only a pajama trouser, I raced for my battle station in a boiler room, as the big ship leaped under my feet from explosions of torpedoes hitting deep in the hull. There were no lights. There was no chance of starting the engines. The order to abandon ship was passed along by voice as the ship began to list steeply.

I attempted to get to a compartment with large portholes through which I might escape when the veteran battleship turned turtle and I was propelled into the medical dispensary, its tiled floor, now the sloping ceiling.

I found myself with four other men in the dispensary with a small pocket of air trapped above the water, our only source for life.

ADOLPH MORTENSEN

With my feet, I found a porthole below the water. I was able to duck down in the water and turn the knobs on the port by hand. It was an eleven-inch porthole. The first two men got out quickly. The steward was hesitant and I pushed his head through and he pulled himself out. The ship's carpenter, Mr. Austin, a large man weighing over 200 pounds, knew he'd never make it through the porthole. He reached down and held the porthole open for me. I tried to take a deep breath, but the oxygen supply was about gone. As I went out, I scraped my hips squeezing through. I think that is where I lost my pajamas. Mr. Austin couldn't get out. His was the most noble and heroic act a man could perform, knowing full well that his minutes were few.

I swam the 15 to 20 feet to the oil covered surface of the harbor. Then, I swam to ropes hanging from the ship's bottom that was still above water. Burning oil nearby sent pillars of smoke skyward. There was a deadly silence over the harbor, interspersed with violent explosions and bursts of gunfire.

As far as I can tell, I was the last man to escape from the ship without help. Cutting torches were used to try to free some of those trapped. I got away with nothing but my skin.

Following the war, Adolph Mortensen taught High School for 27 years in Oakland, California.

Medals and Awards: American Theater Campaign Medal, American Defense Medal, Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal with 6 battle stars, World War II Victory Medal, Pearl Harbor Medal (Act of Congress 1990), Good Conduct Medal, Purple Heart

Adolph Henry Mortensen died suddenly in November, 2000. He had attained the rank of Commander. His is survived by his wife of nearly 60 years, Elizabeth, his son Captain Carl Mortensen, his daughter Susan Mortensen Landreth, and four granddaughters, Emily Landreth Millias, Abigail Landreth, Kirsten Mortensen and Amber Mortensen.

Mr. Mortensen had a long and happy career as a high school industrial arts teacher. He gladly responded to the correspondence that his Pearl Harbor memoirs elicited. In addition to the memoirs detailed in the preceding text, his photograph and story are to be found in the prologue of the book, "Pearl Harbor: Day of Infamy - An Illustrated History."